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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002903

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: THAILAND: UPPER NORTHEAST - THIS IS THAKSIN COUNTRY

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra remains very popular in Thailand's upper northeastern provinces, a recent traverse of three provinces along the Mekong River revealed. Contacts consistently asserted that the majority of eligible voters still support Puea Thai and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, or "red-shirts"), despite the fact that, since April, Thaksin has provided minimal financial support for their activities. Erstwhile red movement component but current government coalition partner Phumjai Thai's efforts to expand its footprint in this part of Isaan (the Thai-language term for the northeast) have gained little traction, damaged evidently by de facto leader Newin Chidchop's behavior and his perceived lack of loyalty to Thaksin. The return to politics of Isaan native son Chavalit Yongchaiyut has apparently had minimal effect on red-shirt activities in the region.

12. (SBU) COMMENT: Support for Thaksin is genuine and deeply held. Despite red-shirt leaders' tendency to grossly overstate the number of participants at various gatherings, voters in Isaan do show a higher level of political sophistication than often ascribed them by the pundits and social elite in Bangkok. Such condescending characterizations feed the discontent people in the Isaan feel towards traditional elites and further fuel their devotion for Thaksin, who they view as the one politician who paid attention to them during his 2001-06 tenure in office.
END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

WE AREN'T IN BANGKOK ANYMORE, TOTO

13. (SBU) PolOff traveled to the upper northeastern provinces of Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, and Nakhon Phanom in early October. Support for Thaksin--and by extension the Puea Thai party and the UDD--remains robust in this part of Thailand. Puea Thai holds all six of Nong Khai's seats in parliament, four of Sakon Nakhon's six (Phumjai Thai won the other two), and two of Nakhon Phanom's four seats (Phumjai Thai and Phuea

Phaendin have one seat each). Contacts in all three provinces claimed that the Isaan is not as prone to heated political confrontations as other parts of the country; our interlocutors attributed this to the strong Buddhist traditions of the region (Note: in fact, prior to the rise of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai movement which united the Isaan politically for the first time, the region's politics were noted for regional barons who battled each other for local dominance. End note). Two other significant factors, however, explaining current dynamics are the dearth of support for the Democrat Party (DP) and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, or "yellow-shirts"), and the rural, agrarian demographic that characterizes the majority of the Isaan population.

14. (SBU) While Isaan is decidedly red--our interlocutors' estimated red-shirt support ranged between 70 and 90 percent--UDD organizers nevertheless tend to overstate attendance at their events here. Most contacts also added the caveat that the UDD supporters in Isaan tend to not be devoted as their Bangkok counterparts (Note: since April, few Isaan supporters have traveled to Bangkok for national rallies, paralleling reports that Thaksin had cut funding for transport and per diem payments to protesters. End note).

15. (SBU) Thanom Somphon, assistant to Puea Thai MP for Sakon Nakhon Niyom Wachkama claimed that about two thousand people regularly gather for red-shirt rallies in the province. Chief of the Sakon Nakhon Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) Pitti Kaewsalupsri, on the other hand, said that the UDD gatherings there generally attracted only about four hundred people. While Nakhon Phanom is undoubtedly the most red of the three provinces we visited, provincial UDD leader and PAO member Manaporn Charoensri's

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wildly optimistic claim that 50,000 red-shirts assembled in September was countered by PAO chief Somboon Sonprapa, who said there are never more than 10,000 at the provincial rallies.

WHY IS THASKIN SO POPULAR HERE?

16. (SBU) Three years after Thaksin's removal from power, the popular support in the northeast that helped Thaksin become the only prime minister in Thai history to complete a full term and be reelected has not waned, and appears as strong as ever. Chief among his virtues, from the Isaan perspective, is that he listened and responded to the rural population, with his populist planks delivering virtually free, universal health care, village funds, limited farmer debt forgiveness, and access to credit previously not enjoyed by poor rural denizens. A sentiment commonly expressed in the northeast and by many Bangkok cab drivers and housekeepers--many of whom come from the northeast--is that while Thaksin was corrupt, at least he gave some back to the poor.

17. (SBU) Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University professor Preecha Thammavintorn has conducted surveys throughout Isaan. He told us that Thaksin, even overseas, retains a reputation of being close to the grassroots; the people still appreciate the results of his programs and policies. Sakon Nakhon PAO chief Pitti separately concurred, adding that Isaan people also appreciated how quickly his programs were implemented. The PAO chief in Nong Khai said Thaksin's methods were so effective that the Abhisit government continued them in an effort to win over Isaan voters. Thongmar Balthaisong, the UDD leader in Nong Khai Province and wife of Puea Thai MP Somkkit Balthaisong, went one step further to claim that while the DP was "copying Thaksin's homework," the local population could see right through it. Many people in Isaan said the DP-sponsored programs would work much better if Thaksin were in charge, according to Theerawat Champachaisri, president of the Nakhon Phanom provincial assembly.

¶8. (SBU) One of the positive byproducts of Thaksin's attention to Isaan is that voters have learned to expect results from elected officials, according to our interlocutors. This development has fundamentally altered the concept of money politics in the northeast. Professor Preecha said his research indicated that the view of accepting money was often more sophisticated than it was often portrayed by media and critics, something most of our interlocutors confirmed. The traditional concept of vote buying, in which villagers accept money from only one candidate and then cast their ballot for that person, has given way to a system where people can take money from multiple politicians, but only vote for the person they believed would provide the greatest benefits. Nakhon Phanom UDD leader Manaporn summarized the Isaan attitude towards money politics as, "the sin is on the provider, not the acceptor." (note: this cynical voter attitude of taking inducements from all parties but voting one's conscience has actually prevailed in southern Thailand for years).

¶9. (SBU) In Sakon Nakhon both Professor Preecha and Senator Pradith Tanwatthanaphong cited the outcome of the June 2009 provincial by-election as proof of this new version of money politics. Phumjai Thai far outspent Puea Thai in the campaign trying to buy votes, they said, but the Puea Thai candidate won. Pradith said the outcome showed the enduring support for Thaksin and Puea Thai was based on results, not just money thrown at voters. Red-shirt organizers in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom reinforced the sentiment that neither party affiliation nor personal influence alone was sufficient to guarantee election victory. On a cautionary note, Manaporn Charoensri said Puea Thai needed to field viable candidates that could produce tangible results, otherwise the people would not vote for them (note: indeed,

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Phumjai Thai bested Puea Thai in Isaan by-elections earlier in 2009, when Puea Thai was having difficulty finding good candidates).

NEWIN HURTS PHUMJAI THAI, CHAVALIT BOOSTS PUEA THAI?

¶10. (SBU) Phumjai Thai's efforts to expand in upper Isaan were evident by the numerous party signs along the highways. A political science professor at the Sakon Nakhon Commercial School said it was an indicator that the party was preparing for elections, which he believed would be held in the coming months. Pitti Kaewsalupsri in Sakon Nakhon told us the two MPs from Phumjai Thai had won their seats because of their prior affiliation with Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai party. Some of our contacts predicted Phumjai Thai could retain those seats, while others said that Puea Thai would take those seats, claiming de facto Phumjai Thai leader Newin Chidchop was a liability to his party.

¶11. (SBU) Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University Professor Preecha said that people in the upper northeast did not trust Newin. Preecha said Newin's behavior revealed that he was looking out only for himself. A professor at Sakon Nakhon Commercial School told us that people in the Isaan valued loyalty, and viewed Newin's alignment with the Democrat-led coalition as a betrayal. The professor also related a recent incident in which Newin publicly slapped a local Phumjai Thai figure, damaging his reputation in the province. Many in Isaan also believed that Newin benefited from a double-standard in the Thai justice system, claimed Mongkol Tansuwan, Chairman of the Nakhon Phanom Chamber of Commerce. He said many people wondered why Newin has been allowed to be so openly involved in politics, and noted that Newin's acquittal in the rubber

sapling case (REFTEL) only fuelled resentment against him.

¶12. (SBU) The return to politics of former Prime Minister and Nakhon Phanom native son Chavalit Yongchaiyut has been largely positive for Puea Thai in the upper northeast, according to those we talked to, even though his net effect nation-wide is debateable. Contacts in Nong Khai and Sakon Nakhon indicated that Chavalit would have little impact locally, but suggested his popularity in his home province would be a boost to Puea Thai. UDD leader Manaporn said that while Chavalit was an important figure, his return would not be enough to guarantee Puea Thai would win all of the regional parliamentary seats in the next election. Somboon Sornprapha, Nakhon Phanom PAO Chief, said that Chavalit's influence has already turned some local Phumjai Thai supporters to Puea Thai. He predicted that this shift, combined with local troubles for Puea Phaendin, meant Puea Thai could easily win all four of the provincial parliament seats in the next election.

KING STILL REIGNS SUPREME

¶13. (C) King Bhumibol remains very popular in the northeast. All of our interlocutors said there was no truth to rumors that residents in Isaan had removed pictures of the King from their homes. Professor Preecha said that if asked to choose between Thaksin and King Bhumibol, the people of the northeast would choose the King. We did note, however, that there was not a portrait of the King visible at the coffee shop owned by Nong Khai UDD leader Thongmar Balthaisong (Note: not all commercial establishments and residences nationwide have portraits of the current King. In many areas, King Chulalongkorn's portrait occupies the place of honor).

¶14. (C) Queen Sirikit and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn clearly do not command the same level respect in Isaan as King Bhumibol, however. Senator Pradith from Sakon Nakhon said the resentment many in the Isaan felt towards the Queen was plainly evident in their discussions; it was not as harsh as the criticism from neighboring Udon Thani Province, however, where he said some of her portraits had been spray-painted.

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According to Professor Preecha, the Crown Prince is not as popular as his father, and the people would have a difficult time accepting his current wife Princess Srirasmi as their queen, based largely on a widely distributed salacious video of the birthday celebration for the Crown Prince's white poodle Fufu, in which Sirasmi appears wearing nothing more than a G-string in front of other guests and still photographers.

JOHN